HOPE WITHOUT APOLOGIES: A POST-FOUNDATIONAL APPROACH TO PEDAGOGY

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Abstract: In an age marked by the collapse of grand narratives, disillusionment with positivist certainty, the eroding effects of nihilism, and the normalisation of genocidal crimes, hope is not only unfashionable but suspect. For many, it signals naivety. Historical determinism has faded, and many retreat into apolitical irony. This article insists that pedagogy must both critique and offer a hopeful vision. Rather than dismissing hope as illusion, I argue for a pedagogy of hope. We can achieve this by resisting two extremes: the absolutism that claims knowledge relies on fixed, universal truths, and the despair of anti-foundationalist cynicism, which denies stable grounds for knowledge and often concludes that meaning, progress, or shared values are impossible. Instead, post-foundationalist thinkers like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe inspire a different path. They reject ultimate, fixed grounds for knowledge or social order. They recognise that all structures are historically and politically contingent, yet they allow for provisional frameworks, ethical commitments, and democratic action. This view suggests that political and pedagogical transformation is not only possible but also necessary, as it involves legitimate forms of knowledge and action.

Key words: Hope; Foundationalism; Anti-foundationalism; Post-foundationalism; Pedagogy.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Adorno (1970: 191) wrote: 'The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again'. However, 'Auschwitz' has happened more than once since then – only now it is, as in Palestine, live-streamed and normalised. This unbearable reality has affected me deeply, both as a researcher and as a human being. A question that has

haunted me especially after the most recent episode of genocidal extermination in Gaza began: what am I doing? What am I talking about while tens, if not hundreds, of people are massacred every day? This feeling was particularly intense in Spring 2024 when I attended one of the largest world conferences, held under the theme: *A Pedagogy of Hope: Gratitude, Diversity and Sustainability in Education*. The organisers of the conference presented this topic as timely, citing climate change, the rise of authoritarianism in the United States – as if Biden was any different – and the assaults on academic freedom. However, not once, not even in a single abstract among hundreds, was there any mention of the ongoing reality that, while we discuss best ways to teach arithmetic, experiment with artificial intelligence (AI) or defend students' autonomy, there are children in Gaza whose bodies have been buried beneath rubble for over a year.

I delivered my presentation. I enjoyed the coffee breaks, the conversations, and short talks, and the walks through that beautiful capital city. But I could not silence the voice inside me that laughed bitterly at the hypocrisy: a whole conference on hope and engagement and call for humanism and universalism, without even acknowledging the elephant in the room – the genocide in Gaza. This normalisation of genocide even among communities of scholars who are expected to have at least a minimum of empathy, reveals something profoundly wrong, not just in geopolitics, but in how we think about hope itself. I began to think that perhaps the problem is also theoretical, not just a product of the academic system, where the 'squid game' of chasing jobs makes us care more about what the system pays us for, rather than genuine concerns in the world.

I think that there is a serious crisis of hope even for those who have taken on the burden of reflecting on the possibility of hope. I refer to the fact that there seems to be reasonable grounds for many that being hopeful might mean either being less critical or naïve. In this article, I highlight this problem, arguing that, on the contrary, we indeed have all the reasons to be hopeful and that an alternative vision of hope is both necessary and possible. To that end, we must rethink the pedagogy of hope without apologies (apologies to those who think they are very smart in their hopelessness, backed by a 'realism' that is, as they say, engendered by the fall of grand narratives or nihilist tendencies).

On the need for a new political imaginary

Critical pedagogy has long sought to liberate education from political and economic domination, aiming to prevent it from merely reproducing oppressive systems. Freire (2000) argued that education can empower learners to challenge oppression and reclaim agency. Philosophers such as Giroux (2021) and McLaren (1987) have demonstrated that schools are not only sites of dominance but also spaces where counter-hegemonic practices and democratic possibilities can emerge. These visions evolved alongside hopes that shifts in the social and political sciences – especially after the fall of positivism, which viewed knowledge as solely empirical and measurable – would help build a more democratic intellectual culture. Specifically, positivism is seen as fuelling essentialism (the belief that social categories have fixed traits) and determinism (the view that outcomes are inevitable due to structural laws). By rejecting positivism, scholars sought greater intellectual flexibility, debate, and the coexistence of multiple perspectives. However, the decline of universalism has instead produced many micro-narratives focused on separate interests, rather than forming broader coalitions. Sometimes, the idea that all viewpoints are equally valid without universal truths allows neo-conservative groups to justify exclusionary politics (Atif, 2025). In the neoliberal era, this decline strategically weakens political debate and critical reflection, encouraging people to accept the status quo rather than challenge it (McLaren, 1987).

Hence, the decline of grand narratives, the fall of positivist epistemologies, and postmodern skepticism have produced a 'crisis of hope'. Educators now face a double bind: past foundational certainties are discredited, while the alternative – anti-foundational nihilism – offers no basis for resistance or transformation. Thus, invoking 'hope' risks dismissal as naïve or irresponsibly utopian. This article argues for a way forward: developing a pedagogy of hope inspired by the post-foundational political theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2012). I will clarify the theoretical underpinnings most relevant to reimagining hope within current educational and political constraints and conclude with implications of this pedagogy for classroom practice.

A post-foundational approach to the pedagogy of hope

Post-foundationalism rejects fixed, universal grounds but avoids the view that no grounds exist at all. It claims that while ultimate foundations are missing, this absence allows for new political and social constructions. As Laclau (1989: 81) notes, 'the dissolution of the myth of foundation does not dissolve the phantom of its own absence'. Marchart (2007) refers to this approach as post-foundationalism. Understanding the differences between foundationalism, anti-foundationalism, and post-foundationalism is crucial for grounding our concept of hope here. Foundationalism ties hope to certainty – anchored in stable truths or guaranteed progress. Here, hope depends on a belief that history leads to a final, unified completion. When foundations crumble, hope can turn to disillusionment. For anti-foundationalism, losing certainty leads to skepticism or cynicism, making hope seem naive or false. Post-foundationalism, on the other hand, sees hope as an active stance shaped by political struggle and uncertainty. It treats hope as a commitment to act within ongoing negotiations over meaning, with new beginnings always possible – even without guarantees. Thus, post-foundationalism rejects both fixed foundations and the surrender that follows their collapse. What do these views suggest for teaching hope?

A foundationalist pedagogy frames hope as teaching universal truths or certainties, guiding students toward a fixed ideal. This approach offers direction but may stifle inquiry and exclude alternative futures. Anti-foundationalist pedagogy views all claims with suspicion, creating distance and treating hope as illusion or ideology. This perspective often leads to cynicism, as noted in the article's introduction. A post-foundational pedagogy of hope embraces uncertainty as a means of learning. It treats education as an ongoing negotiation, where students and teachers challenge the present and stay open to new futures. In this model, hope is created by collective action, grounded in the possibility of change – even without fixed ends.

A post-foundational pedagogy of hope resists both rigid certainty and passive cynicism. Instead of relying on fixed systems or falling into resignation, it encourages acting within uncertainty (Ichikawa, 2022). Hope is not naive optimism or a return to grand narratives, but a critical stance toward the future and a refusal to accept the present as unchangeable. This approach means

rethinking educational methods. Rather than offering final answers, it requires learning to deal with uncertainty and conflict together. Hope means seeing education as a continuous, unfinished project rooted in the belief that change is possible, even in the face of difficulty. Instead of waiting for perfect conditions, we act now in imperfect, contested spaces. This kind of hope affirms that new solidarities and futures can emerge, not by ignoring complexity, but by facing it. Teaching with hope insists that education can create new and better possibilities.

Turning to classroom practice is not an escape from global issues into local matters. Instead, it highlights that the classroom is where global struggles are felt – and where critical pedagogy can either be silent or an open space for new solidarity. Gaza is not 'outside' education; it tests whether pedagogy can face the political realities shaping our shared present and future.

Enacting a pedagogy of hope in the classroom

An articulated post-foundational approach to the pedagogy of hope can reconfigure the classroom as a space where education becomes a practice of opening possibilities. Teaching is understood as a political and ethical commitment that keeps the horizon of the possible open. In concrete terms, this implies a shift in pedagogical priorities: from certainty to critical engagement, from compliance to agency, and from replicating the given to constructing the new. First, a pedagogy of hope requires educators to treat the classroom as a site of struggle over meaning. It rejects the assumption that the present social order is either natural or inevitable. Instead, it insists that all social arrangements – curricula, disciplinary norms, assessment practices – are historically contingent and subject to articulation. This view mandates that teachers create conditions where students can interrogate dominant narratives and develop counter-hegemonic understandings of their world. This might involve problem-posing education, project-based inquiry, or critical reading of texts that foreground multiple and contested perspectives. The point is not to impose alternative truths but to cultivate an awareness of the political constructedness of truth itself and, in doing so, affirm the possibility of thinking and acting otherwise.

Second, this pedagogy calls for reimagining the teacher's role – not as an expert who transmits knowledge but as a co-learner and facilitator of

democratic dialogue. To teach with hope is to commit to pedagogical relations that are dialogical, relational, and open-ended. In this sense, authority is not abandoned but reconstituted as a shared responsibility for sustaining a learning community oriented toward justice and transformation. Teachers enact hope when they invite students to bring their lived experiences into the learning process, validate diverse knowledge, and refuse closure in favour of critical openness. Importantly, this does not mean the abdication of intellectual rigour; rather, it means rigour aligned with emancipation rather than domination.

Finally, a pedagogy of hope engages the future as a field of potentiality. It resists the fatalism of neoliberal realism and the paralysing detachment of postmodern irony. Instead, it insists that education can still be a space to imagine new social forms even amid fragmentation and crisis. This pedagogical stance entails cultivating not passive optimism in students but a critical orientation toward the future – an understanding that the world, as it stands, is not all that it could be. Classroom practices that embody this orientation might include speculative writing, utopian thinking, or community-based learning projects aimed at real-world intervention. What matters is not the achievement of a final goal but the enactment of a disposition: to act *as if* change were possible and to teach in ways that make this belief intelligible and actionable.

Conclusion

Reclaiming a pedagogy of hope is not a retreat into naïvety or a denial of political complexity. On the contrary, it is an acknowledgment that without hope, education may reproduce the very systems of despair it seeks to challenge. And yet, in moments of fatigue, one might confess: 'I hope not to hope – hope is killing me'. So, is the solution to give up on hope? The same despairing voice would answer, 'I hope so'. But this contradiction is precisely where a pedagogy of hope begins – not in clarity, but in the play between irony and urgency. A pedagogy of hope without apologies is, above all, a pedagogy of engagement. It does not wait for perfect conditions but begins in the messiness of the everyday. While students and teachers acknowledge that power is uneven, they can dare to imagine otherwise thanks to a sober hope that is not a guarantee, but a practice – one that lives in the tension between despair and action, between exhaustion and the stubborn belief that something new might still emerge.

To return to where this article began: the genocide in Gaza, and its unsettling silence in educational spaces, poses a challenge to any pedagogy of hope. Post-foundationalism helps us understand this situation by insisting that there are no ultimate guarantees or stable moral grounds that will prevent atrocities. Yet, it also affirms that this absence does not mean resignation. Instead, it calls for political and pedagogical practices that remain open, contingent, and committed to rearticulating solidarity in the face of despair. A pedagogy of hope, then, is not simply about classrooms but about how educators, students, and intellectuals position themselves about the most urgent injustices of our time.

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